

## HIGHER EDUCATION AT THE CROSS-ROADS

### Whither the Christian College?

(Fr Paul Verghese)

The Indian University is an exotic plant that has not flourished very well on the native soil. But then so is our total system of socio-cultural values in India today.

Of course there were the ancient universities of Bharat that one could enumerate - Takshasila, Varanasi, Nalanda, Vikramashila, Valabhi, Navadvipa, Conjeevaram. Three of these were Hindu temple schools - Varanasi, Navadvipa and Conjeevaram, whereas Nalanda, Vikramashila and Valabhi were Buddhist centres of higher education, attached to places of historical-religious interest like Buddhaviharas.

Takshasila seems to have had both Buddhist and Hindu associations, and was something of an international centre of learning to which young princes came from scores of kingdoms beyond the Sindhu and the Ganga.

We will have occasion to look at the curricula and syllabi of these Indian centres later on. The point to note here is that these are not the ancestors of our modern Indian universities. Their ancestry is to be sought in that peculiar western situation of the 18th century - a secularized Christian monastic culture. That is why the Indian university is an exotic plant - not yet accustomed to our soil here, and perhaps never likely to adapt itself sufficiently to our needs, unless someone tries a bit of grafting and cross-fertilization.



What I am suggesting is more radical than you may at first think. The point is that the Christian college of the future cannot expect to make something of itself by excelling within the objectives set for higher education by the national plan or the Education Commission Report. The time has come for the Christian College to examine the value system of a disintegrating western culture to which we seem to be committed in both our national plan and in the Education Commission Report. The issues are much deeper. The call is for the new man, and not just for the economically emancipated man or woman.

The very word 'value' is a special western creation which reflects the acquisitive milieu in which that culture took shape. To say that we should seek not just after material values, but should also strive for spiritual values, does not take us out of the vicious circle of western philosophy, where the summum bonum, the highest good, is still something to be acquired and appropriated. We are still in the acquisitiveness-private property syndrome, even when that which is sought to be acquired may be 'spiritual'. How to break the vicious grasp of this acquisitiveness and the resultant aggressiveness, which two realities underline the whole of western civilization as we know it?

The fruit of the spirit is not something the tree of life acquires for itself, but rather something which it produces to be consumed by others. The tree does not seek after fruit in order to consume it.

The fruit of the tree is always for others. How do we develop the capacity to put the stress on producing in order that we may be able to give, rather than producing in order to consume?



It is in embodying a totally new value system in which science and technology, the arts and professions are all geared to self-giving and service, and the silent riches of significant existence that Christian Colleges would have to pioneer in the future.

A fresh study of the objectives of the ancient Indian and Western universities, and a fresh understanding of the Christian Gospel alone can show us the way here.

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Are there any "values" to be recovered from our ancient Indian Universities? Whatever is good in the ancient Indian Sarvakalasala tradition belongs to the whole human race and ought to be recovered and manifested by the modern Indian University and by the Christian College in particular.

The most important single element that impresses me in the Sarvakalasala tradition is their commitment to wisdom - in other words their capacity to hold scientia and oratio together. In that separation between knowledge and prayer lies both the strength and the weakness of western civilization. We should recover our own Indian capacity to hold knowledge in alliance with personal character and prayer, so that wisdom may ensue.

This seems to me to be the great challenge facing the Christian College of tomorrow. How can we develop the community of love, wisdom and power, which alone can be a true manifestation or revelation of who God is? I would suggest the following outline programme for a Christian college in the future.

- (1) Totally reorganize the administrative set-up within the college that it becomes a genuine community of human beings with freedom and responsibility for all. This means the setting up of various bodies in the Christian College in such a way that all can participate in the actual running of the college, including continuing curriculum revision, policy-making and administration. The representation in certain bodies will be on the basis of one man or one woman one vote, in others on the basis of competence and interest. Student services will have to be promoted within the community to make genuine community possible, both for hostellers and for scholars.



- (2) Restructure the community relations picture in such a way that the college community becomes a significant influence for peace and progress within the larger community. This would mean making significant contributions to the life of the larger community in terms of
- (a) providing a forum for discussing difficult community problems in an atmosphere of openness, restraint and mutual trust;
  - (b) providing the community with pioneering projects and ideas which can be taken over by the community
  - (c) continuing to provide certain services to the community like adult education, extension courses in politics, economics, sociology and if possible in technological subjects.
  - (d) being a reconciling influence between major factors in the community.
- (3) Reorganize the Christian community within the college in order to enable them to better fulfil the objectives in (1) and (2).
- (4) Train a group of college teachers who have had an opportunity to reflect more deeply about the true Christian purpose of life on earth, and to commit themselves to a more radically Christian way of life in the college community. Here I would emphasize the study of western as well as Indian and other asian forms of philosophy and spirituality, so that the Christian community in the college becomes a genuinely transforming force, but not in the direction of western secular society. This does not mean that



the Christian community should shy away from the positive values of secular culture, but it does mean that Christians should understand them critically in their historical origin and contemporary relevance. Here the study of Buddhism and Hinduism, especially Gandhism, seems to me of primary importance. Some teaching in these three spiritualities (Buddhism, Hinduism, and Gandhism) should be made absolutely compulsory for all degree programmes in Christian Colleges.

- (5) Philosophy must become a necessary part of the college curriculum. Students should be trained to think clearly and deeply. This capacity for philosophical reflection is now largely lost in the Western university tradition. Such philosophical reflection should comprehend the fields of sociology, Psychology, Economics and Anthropology, and should help the student to acquire a central nuclear category by which to integrate all knowledge and experience into some significantly meaningful pattern, which is continually open to revision, but which provides a perspective for life orientation including vocational choice and the service rendered through one's vocation.
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These elements are in addition to the emphasis made in the Kothari Commission Report about work-orientation, service-motivation, relevance, research emphasis and so on.

There is one final task which we have a right to expect a Christian College in India today to perform. This is the task of a re-orientation in an our grasp of the Christian faith. We are now enslaved by the categories of western thought, and even when we differ, which is very seldom, from our western brethren in matters of faith, it is in terms of the questions posed by the western debate. Christianity has been fundamentally misinterpreted in the west, and we need to recover a fresh Indian understanding of Christianity. This is unlikely to come from the Indian theologians alone, since they have been rather badly brainwashed for too long a time.

The Christian College must assist in the recovery of a new vision of the Christian faith - a crying need for many intelligent laymen of our country, who find much of our present theology bewilderingly irrelevant. This must be done in the context of an adequate grasp of Hindu philosophy and spirituality, but with due regard also to the problems posed by science and technology.